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Walker et al.

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(54) **CONDITIONAL PURCHASE OFFER (CPO) MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR PACKAGES**

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(22) Filed: **Sep. 4, 1997**

Related U.S. Application Data

(63) Continuation-in-part of application No. 08/889,319, filed on Jul. 8, 1997, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 08/707,660, filed on Sep. 4, 1996.

(51) **Int. Cl.**⁷ **G06F 17/60**

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **705/1; 705/1; 705/38; 705/39; 705/24; 705/25; 705/26; 705/27; 380/23; 380/25; 902/22; 902/24; 902/25**

(58) **Field of Search** **705/1, 38, 39, 705/211-27; 380/23, 25; 902/22, 24, 25**

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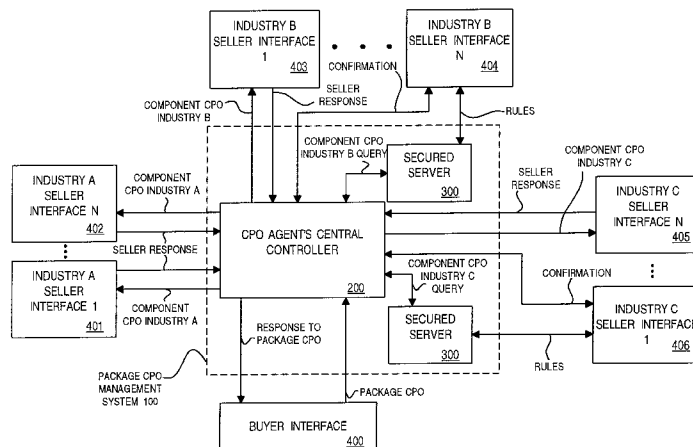
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A conditional purchase offer (CPO) management system for receiving and processing CPOs for packages of component goods or services. The package CPO management system preferably deconstructs an overall package CPO into component CPOs which are individually offered to sellers. If each component CPO of a given package CPO is accepted, the package CPO management system binds the buyer, on behalf of each of the accepting sellers, to purchase the entire package. An offer price for each component CPO is preferably calculated by initially determining the total market price of the package based on the market price of each individual component good or service within the package. The package CPO management system then calculates an offer price for each component CPO based on the total price offered by the buyer for the entire package (as adjusted by a reserved margin, if appropriate) multiplied by the ratio of the market price of the respective component CPO to the total market price of the package. As each individual component CPO is accepted by a seller, the package CPO management system preferably enters a "pre-bind" agreement with the seller, whereby the component good or service is reserved for a predefined time period to pen-nit the package CPO management system to complete the processing of the remaining active component CPOs. The package CPO management system preferably provides an optional agency feature that permits the package CPO management system to accept or reject a given component CPO on behalf of certain sellers who have delegated such authority to the package CPO management system.

41 Claims, 18 Drawing Sheets



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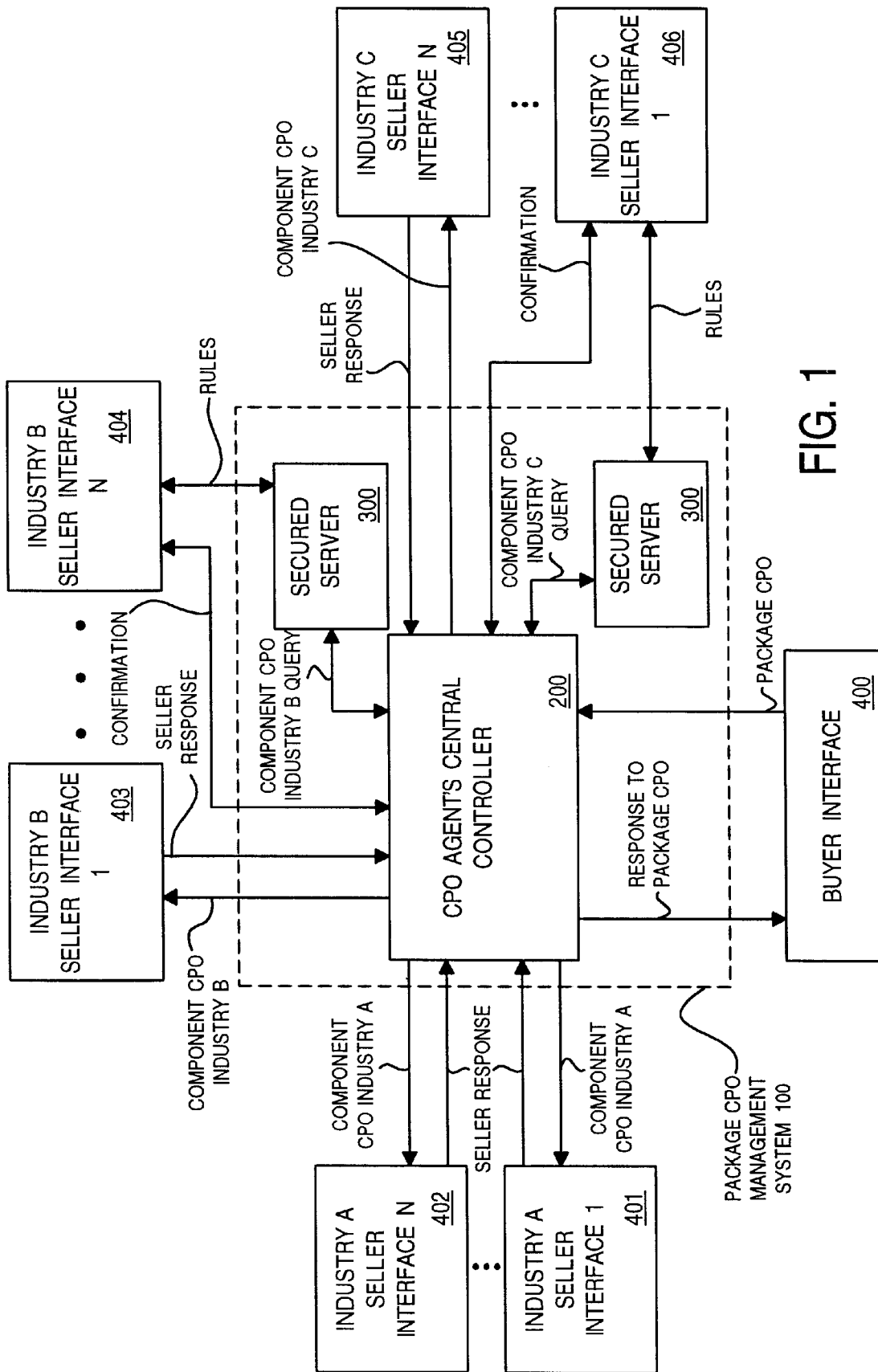


FIG. 1

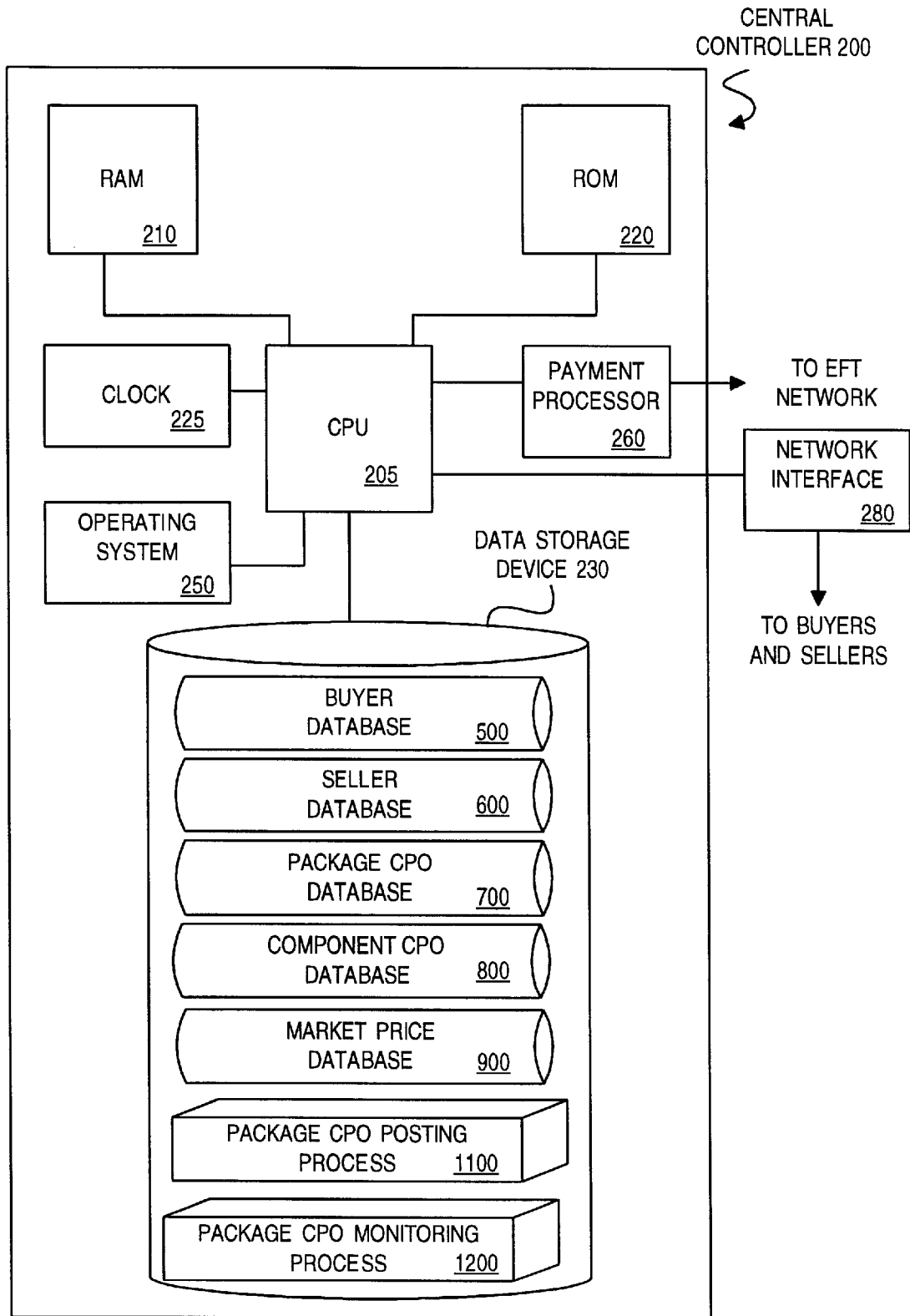


FIG. 2

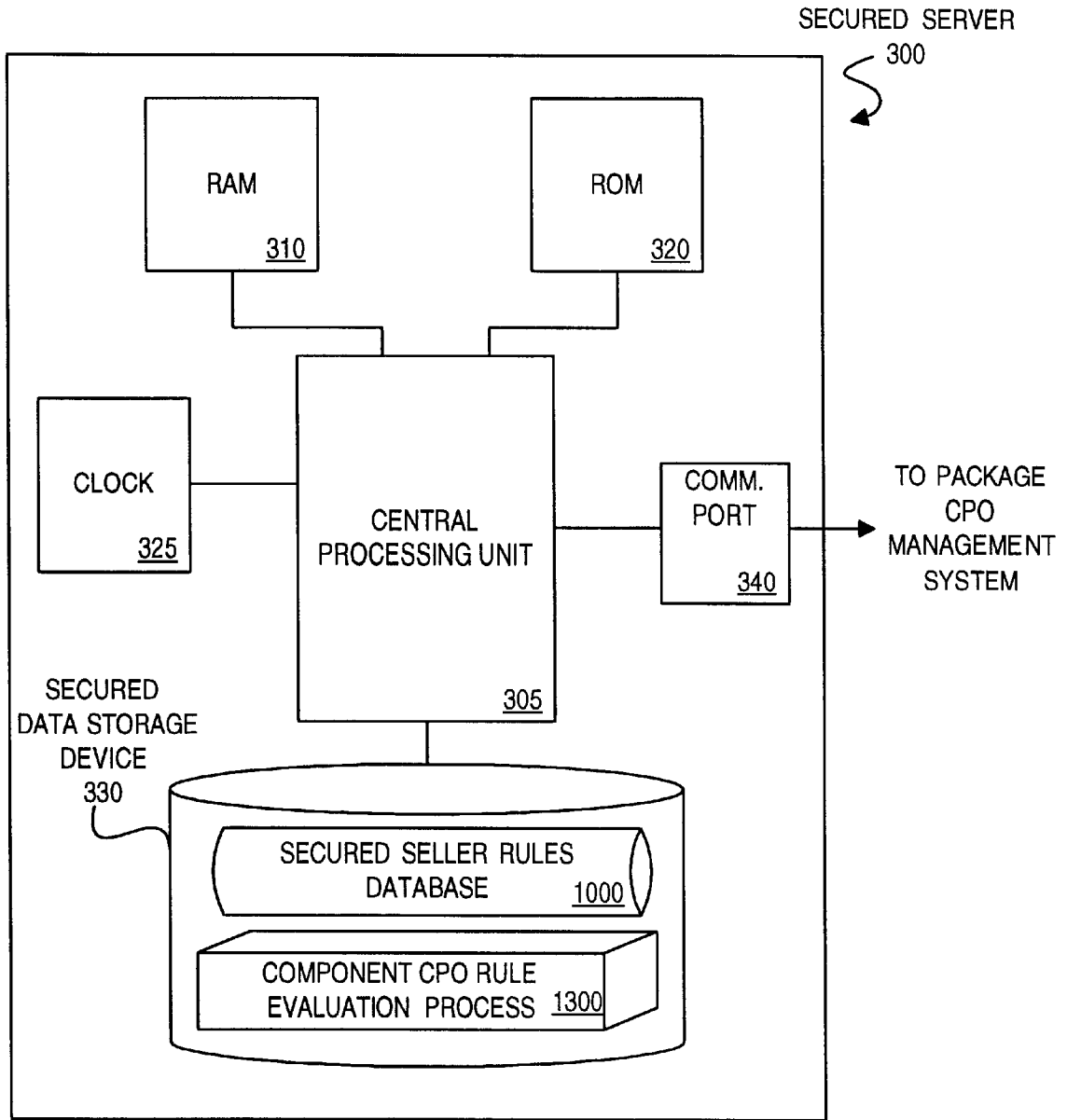


FIG. 3

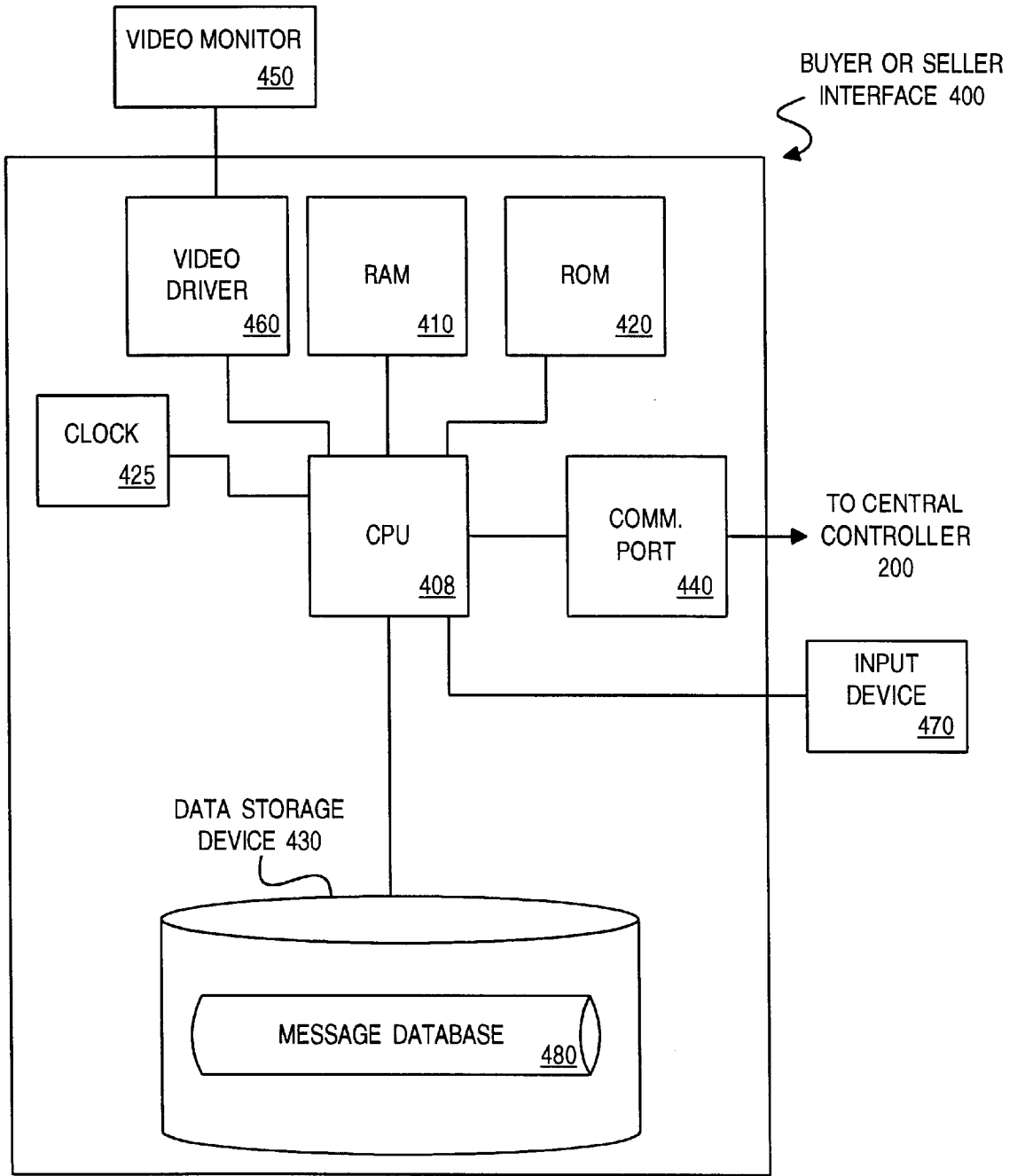


FIG. 4

BUYER DATABASE 500



BUYER ID NUMBER <u>520</u>	NAME <u>525</u>	ADDRESS <u>530</u>	CREDIT CARD ACCOUNT NUMBER <u>535</u>	CPO NUMBER(S) <u>540</u>
22222	JOHN SMITH	3 MAIN ST.	2222-2222-2222-2222	P001
33333	SUE JOHNSON	4 PINE ST.	3333-3333-3333-3333	P002
44444	DAVE MCCARTHY	6 TEMPLE ST.	4444-4444-4444-4444	627

505

510

515

FIG. 5

SELLER DATABASE 600



SELLER ID NUMBER 635	SELLER NAME 640	CPO TRACKING NUMBER 645
67676	AMERICAN AIRLINES	PC261
89898	DELTA AIRLINES	P0627
45454	AVIS	P2491
42929	HERTZ	P6789
81818	SHERATON	P9842
47474	HILTON	P0987

605

610

615

620

625

630

FIG. 6

PACKAGE CPO DATABASE 700

PACKAGE CPO NUMBER 720	STATUS 725	ORIGINAL PACKAGE PRICE 730	MARGIN FACTOR 735	REMAINING MARGIN 740	ADJUSTED PACKAGE CPO PRICE 745	PER ALLOCATION MARGIN PERCENTAGE 750	POSTING DATE 755
P001	33.3% COMPLETE	\$1,000.00	10%	\$50	\$900	50%	8/1/97
P002	ACTIVE	\$2,000.00	10%	\$200	\$1800	50%	8/15/97

705

710

EXPIRATION DATE 760	TOTAL POSTING DURATION 765	POSTING TIME REQUIRED FOR EACH MARGIN ALLOCATION 770	COMPONENTS 775	CONDITIONS OF COMPONENTS 780	COMPONENT CPO NUMBERS 785	BUYER ID NUMBER 790
8/30/97	30 DAYS	.3 X TOTAL POSTING DURATION	ROUND TRIP AIRLINE TICKETS NEW YORK TO ORLANDO	FIRST CLASS LEAVE 10/1, RETURN 10/7	PC261	22222
			CAR RENTAL	MID SIZE 10/1-10/7	PC262	
			HOTEL ROOM	NORMAL ROOM 10/1-10/7	PC263	
9/15/97	30 DAYS	.3 X TOTAL POSTING DURATION	ROUND TRIP AIRLINE TICKETS NEW YORK TO ORLANDO	FIRST CLASS LEAVE 10/1, RETURN 10/7	PC275	33333
			CAR RENTAL	LUXURY 10/1-10/7	PC276	
			HOTEL ROOM	SUITE 10/1-10/7	PC277	

FIG. 7

COMPONENT CPO DATABASE 800



COMPONENT CPO NUMBER 840	STATUS/PRE-BIND EXPIRATION DATE 845	SUBJECT 850	PRICE 855	CONDITIONS 860	BUYER ID NUMBER 865
PC261	PRE-BIND COMPLETED 8/15/97	AIRLINE TICKETS	\$360	ROUNDRIP NY TO ORLANDO, LEAVE 10/1, RETURN 10/7 FIRST CLASS	22222
PC262	ACTIVE	CAR RENTAL	\$226	ORLANDO MID-SIZE 10/1- 10/7/97	22222
PC263	ACTIVE	HOTEL ROOM	\$364	ORLANDO NORMAL ROOM 10/1-10/7	22222
PC275	ACTIVE	AIRLINE TICKETS	\$576	ROUND TRIP NY TO ORLANDO, LEAVE 10/1, RETURN 10/7, FIRST CLASS	33333
PC276	ACTIVE	CAR RENTAL	\$468	ORLANDO LUXURY 10/1-10/7	33333
PC277	ACTIVE	HOTEL	\$756	ORLANDO SUITE 10/1-10/7	33333

805

810

815

820

825

830

FIG. 8

MARKET PRICE DATABASE 900



PRODUCT <u>960</u>	QUALITY/SERVICE LEVEL <u>965</u>	TIME PERIOD <u>970</u>	MARKET PRICE <u>975</u>
905 ROUND TRIP AIRLINE TICKETS	FIRST CLASS	FIRST WEEK OF NOVEMBER	\$420
910 ROUND TRIP AIRLINE TICKETS	BUSINESS CLASS	FIRST WEEK OF NOVEMBER	\$350
915 ROUND TRIP AIRLINE TICKETS	COACH	FIRST WEEK OF NOVEMBER	\$290
920 CAR RENTAL	LUXURY	FIRST WEEK OF NOVEMBER	\$300
925 CAR RENTAL	MID-SIZE	FIRST WEEK OF NOVEMBER	\$250
930 CAR RENTAL	COMPACT	FIRST WEEK OF NOVEMBER	\$200
935 HOTEL	SUITE	FIRST WEEK OF NOVEMBER	\$550
940 HOTEL	NORMAL	FIRST WEEK OF NOVEMBER	\$400
945 HOTEL	ECONOMY	FIRST WEEK OF NOVEMBER	\$300

FIG. 9

SECURED AIRLINE RULES DATABASE 1000



RULE NUMBER 1010	ORIGINATING CITY 1012	DESTINATION CITY 1014	CONNECTION RESTRICTIONS 1016	FLIGHT NUMBERS 1018	DATE(S) OF DEPARTURE 1020	TIME(S) OF DEPARTURE 1022	DEPARTURE DAY OF WEEK 1024
45685	NEWARK, NJ (EWR)	ORLANDO, FL (MCO)	N/A	N/A	10/1/97-10/31/97	N/A	TUES.-THURS.
45687	NEW YORK, NY (JFK)	CHICAGO, IL (ORD)	THRU CLEVELAND OR PITTSBURG	N/A	4/1/97-5/31/97	11AM-2PM	TUES.

1002

1004

DATE(S) OF RETURN 1026	TIMES OF RETURN 1030	RETURN DAY OF WEEK 1032	NUMBER OF PASSENGERS TRAVELING 1034	LENGTH OF HAUL 1036	YIELD (\$/MILE) 1038	MINIMUM PRICE 1040	INVENTORY RESTRICTIONS OR AVAILABILITY 1042	ADVANCE PURCHASE REQUIREMENTS 1044
10/1/97-10/31/97	N/A	TUES.-THURS.	AT LEAST 2	N/A	N/A	\$165.00	K INVENTORY ONLY	WITHIN 21 DAYS OF FLIGHT
4/1/97-5/31/97	11AM-2PM	MON.-THURS.	2	N/A	N/A	\$150.00	Q OR K INVENTORY ONLY	7-21 DAYS PRIOR TO FLIGHT

FIG. 10a

SECURED HOTEL RULES DATABASE 1050



RULE NUMBER 1060	HOTEL SITE 1065	LENGTH OF STAY 1070	CHECK-IN DAY OF WEEK 1075	CHECK-OUT DAY OF WEEK 1080	MINIMUM PRICE 1085	ADVANCE PURCHASE REQUIREMENTS 1090
22233	TAMPA, FLORIDA	3 DAYS	THURSDAY	SATURDAY	\$350.00	WITHIN 7 DAYS OF CHECK-IN
22234	MIAMI, FLORIDA	7 DAYS	MONDAY	MONDAY	\$700.00	WITHIN 21 DAYS OF CHECK-IN
22235	ORLANDO, FLORIDA	5 DAYS	MONDAY	FRIDAY	\$500.00	WITHIN 28 DAYS OF CHECK-IN

1052

1054

1056

FIG. 10b

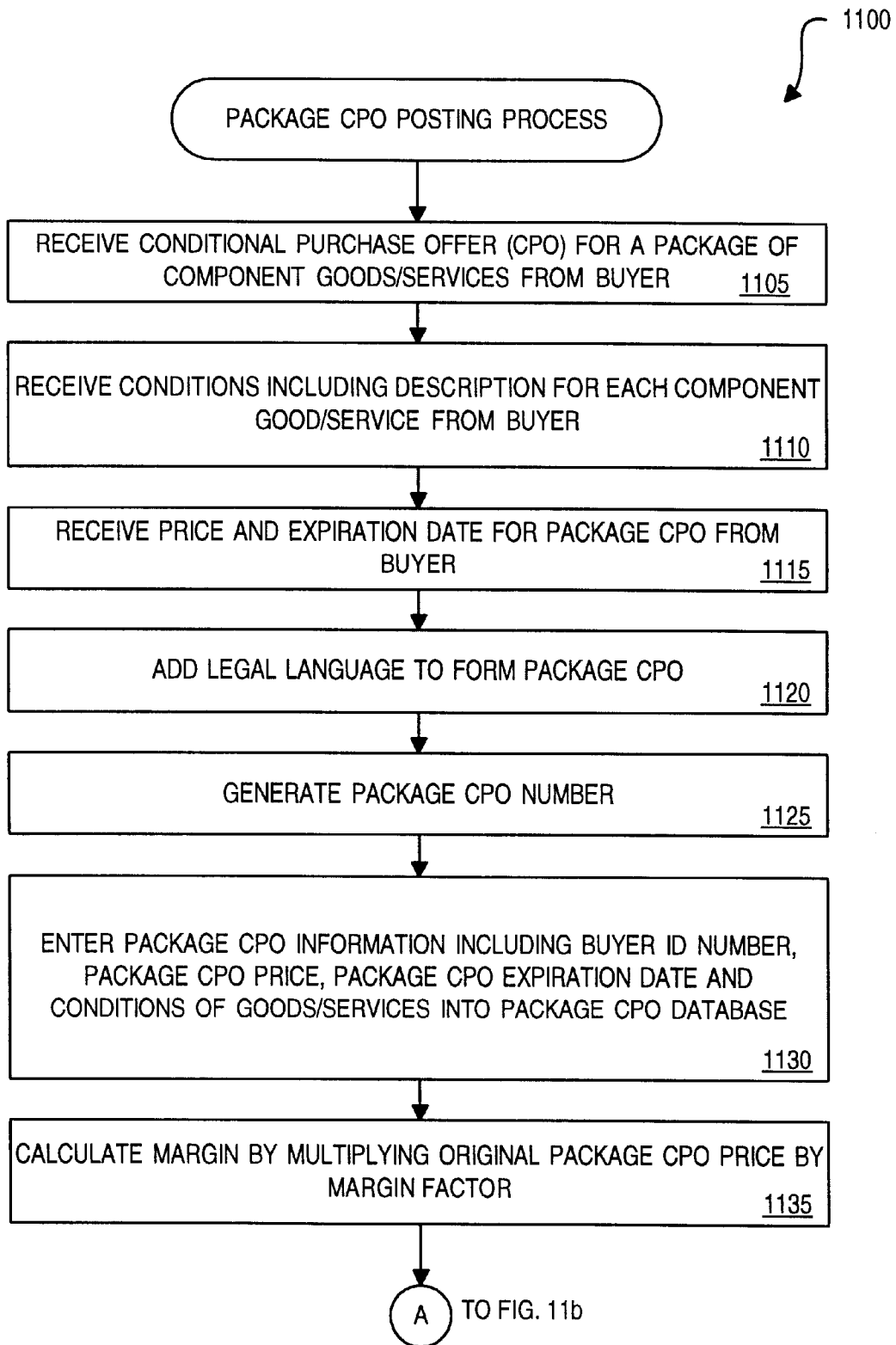


FIG. 11a

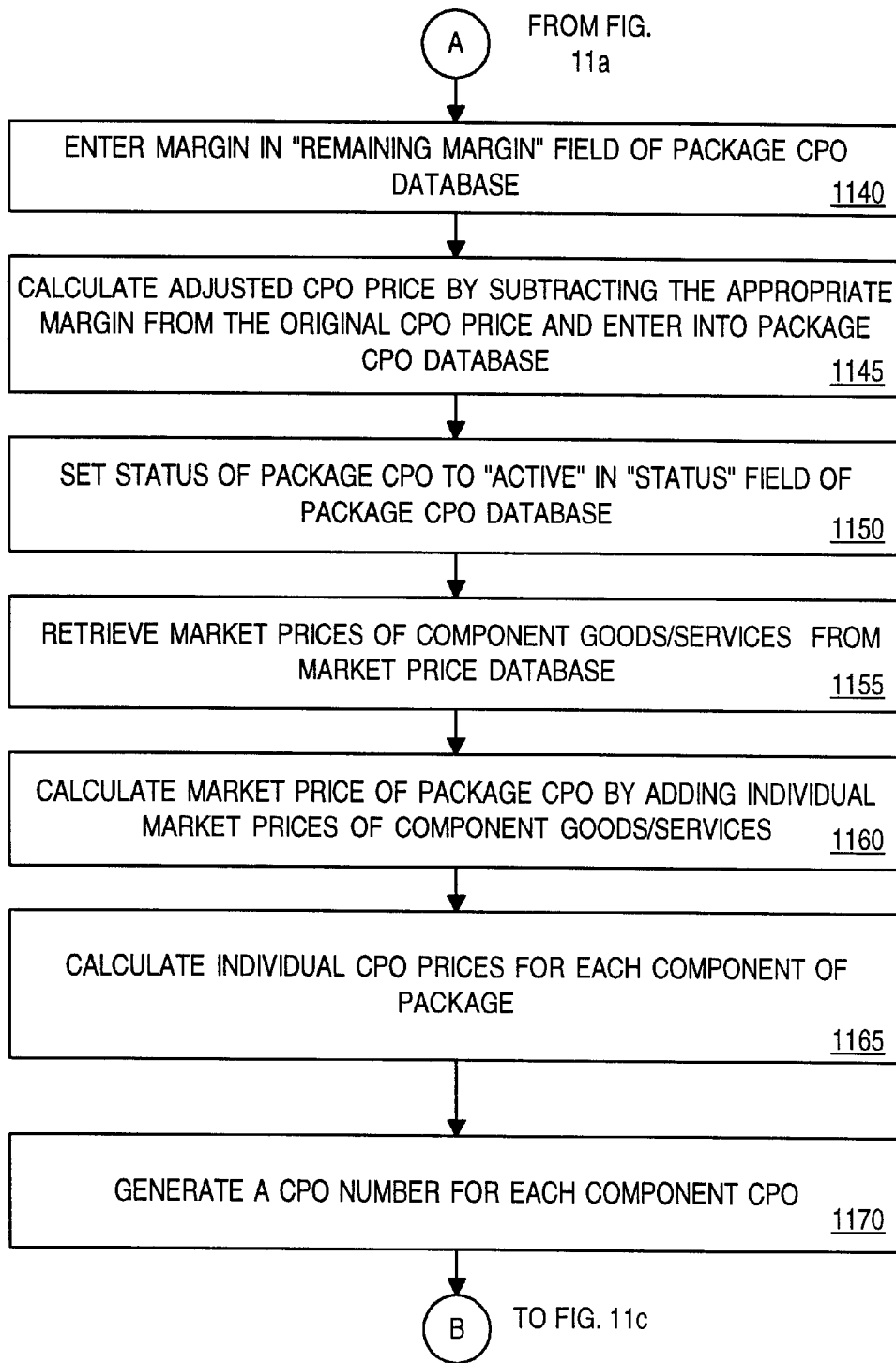


FIG. 11b

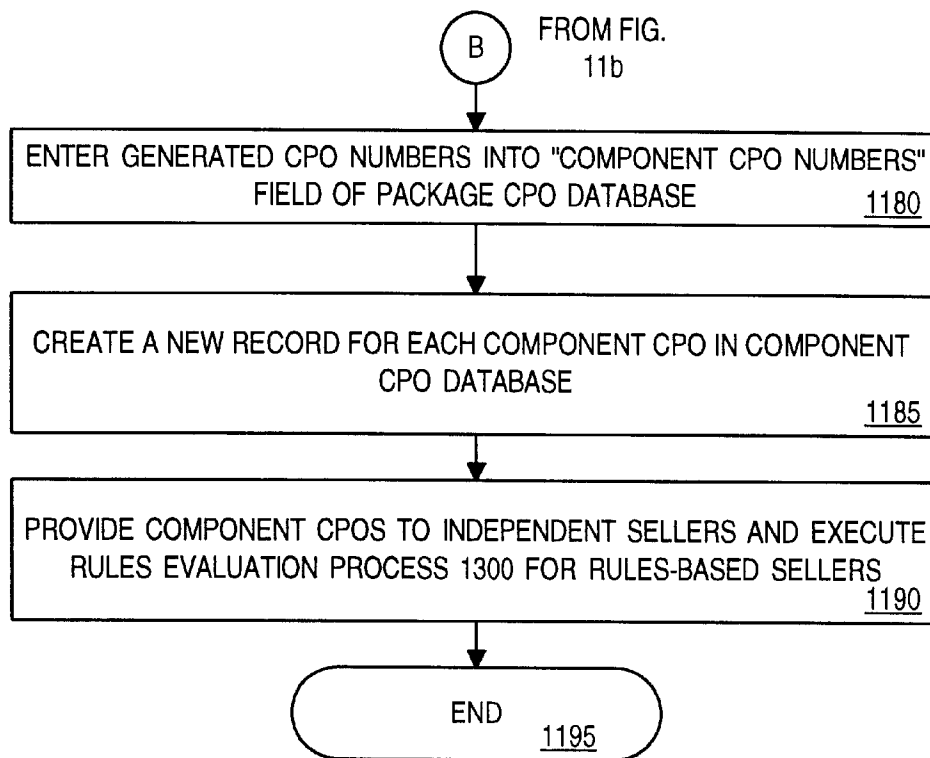


FIG. 11c

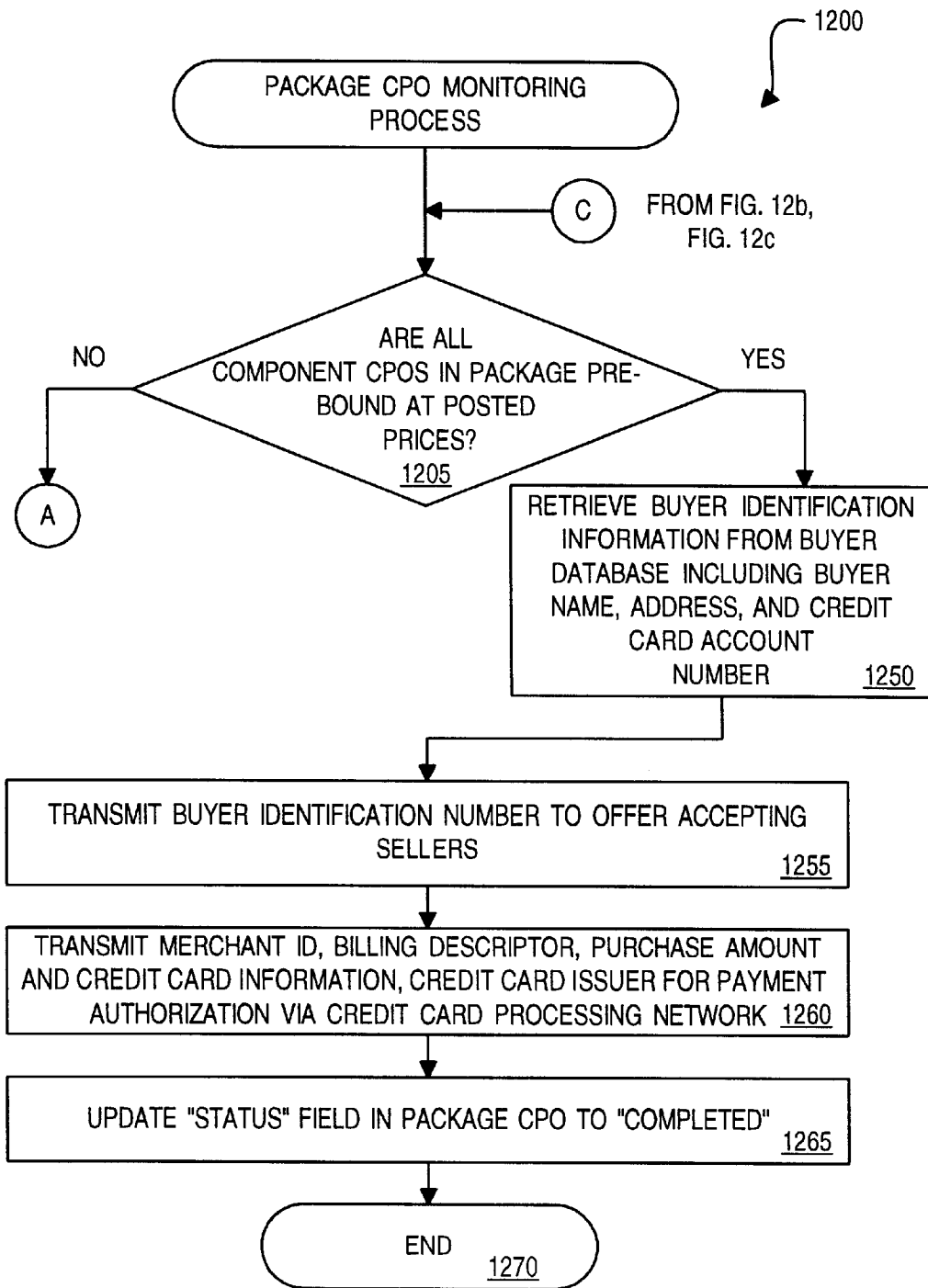


FIG. 12a

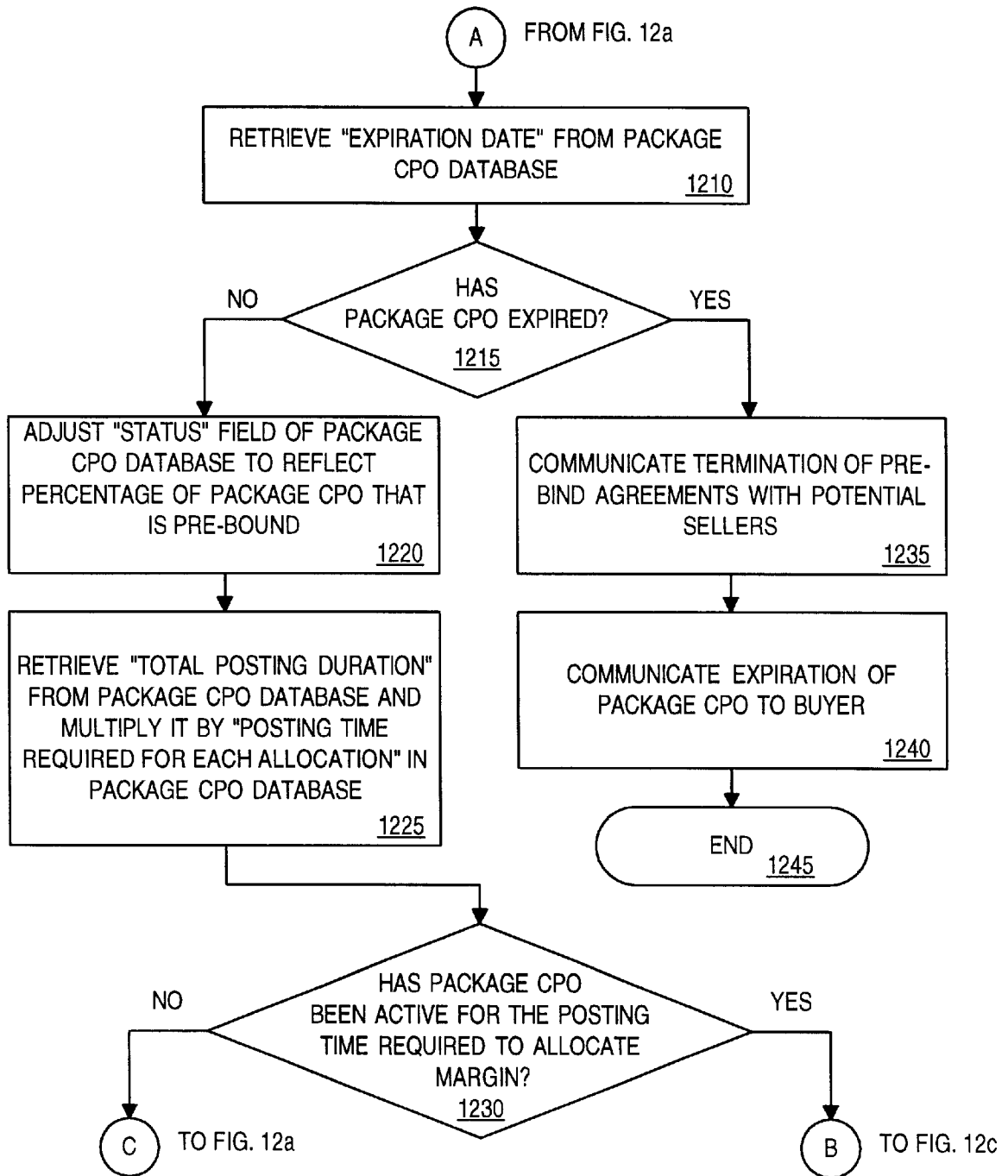


FIG. 12b

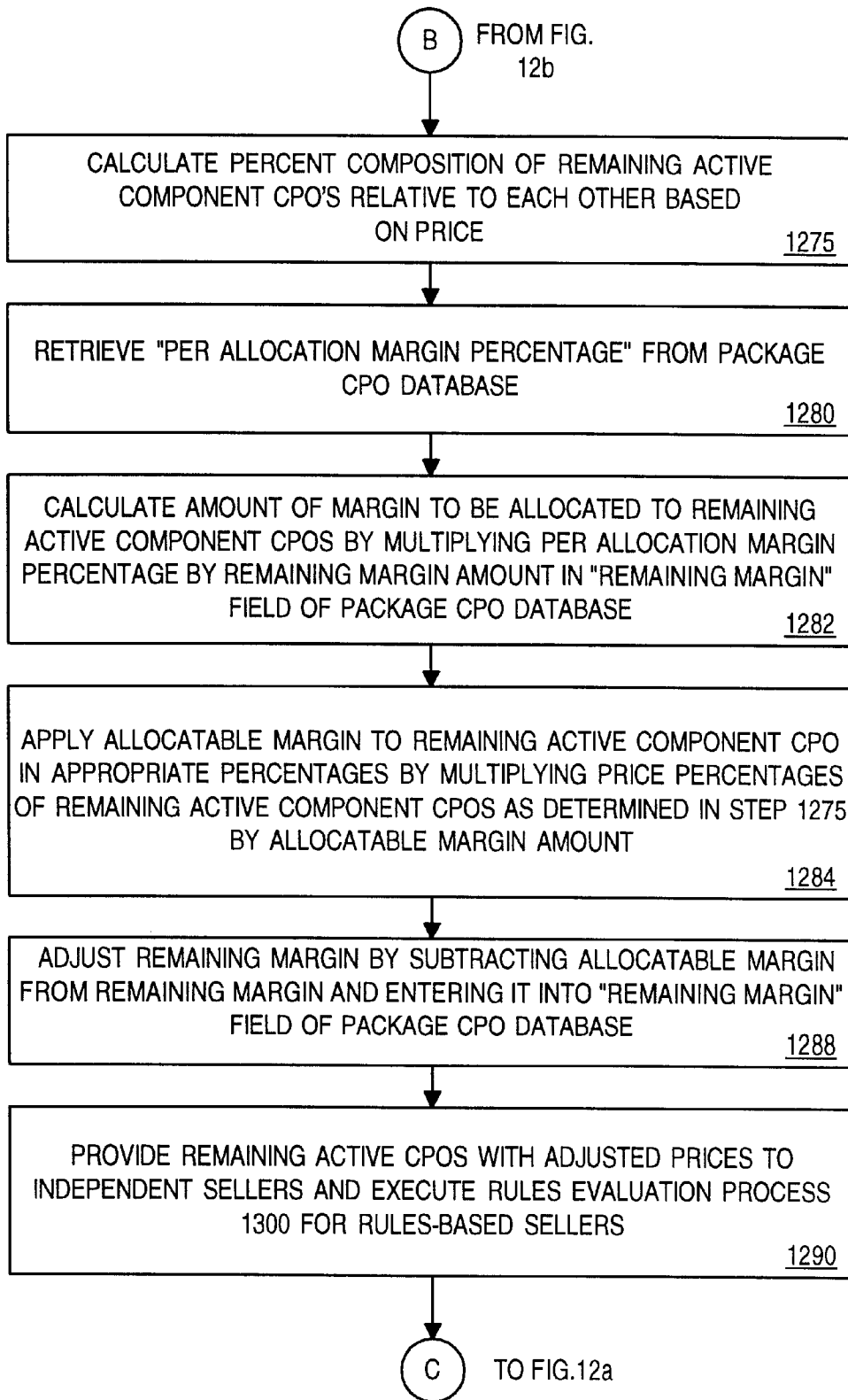


FIG. 12c

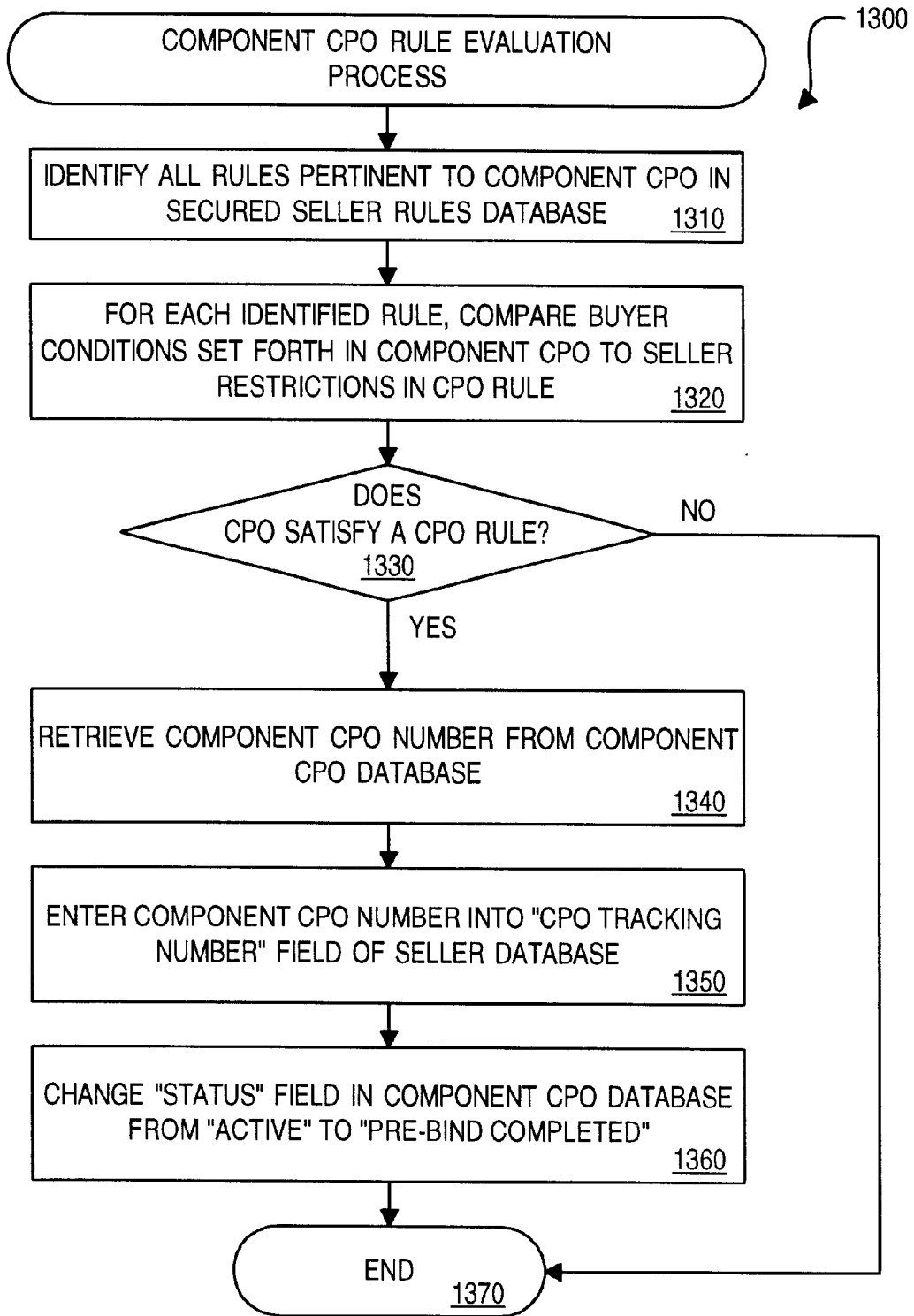


FIG. 13

CONDITIONAL PURCHASE OFFER (CPO) MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR PACKAGES

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 08/889,319, filed Jul. 8, 1997, which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 08/707,660, filed Sep. 4, 1996, each incorporated by reference herein.

The present invention is related to the following United States patent applications filed contemporaneously herewith: "Conditional Purchase Offer Management System for Telephone Calls," U.S. patent application Ser. No. 08/923,317 (Attorney Docket No. WD2-97-028 now pending); "Conditional Purchase Offer Management System for Cruises," U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/468,574 (Attorney Docket No. WD2-97-069 now pending); "Conditional Purchase Offer Management System for Event Tickets," U.S. patent application Ser. No. 08/923,530 (Attorney Docket No. WD2-96-081 now pending); and "Conditional Purchase Offer and Third-Party Input Management System," U.S. patent application Ser. No. 08/923,524 (Attorney Docket No. WD2-97-067 now pending), each assigned to the assignee of the present invention and incorporated by reference herein.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to a system for processing the sale of goods and services and, more particularly, to a system for managing the sale of packages of such goods and services by one or more sellers, such as an airline and hotel, to buyers who have submitted offers for the purchase of such a package.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Many sellers have developed sophisticated revenue management systems (RMSs) to optimize revenue. Travel-related sellers, in particular, such as airlines, hotels, cruises and car rental agencies, rely heavily on revenue management systems to dynamically set the price for available inventory. Generally, when a flight is first added to an airline's flight schedule, for example, the airline's revenue management system attempts to maximize revenue for the flight by establishing a plurality of price classes and then allocating the number of seats and price assigned to each price class. The revenue management system thereafter continues to monitor the actual demand within each price class relative to forecasted demand, dynamically reevaluating the inventory allocation and pricing of each price class for a given flight. In this manner, the airlines attempt to fly each aircraft as full as possible without allowing earlier-booking discount-fare travelers to displace later-booking full-fare travelers. The revenue management systems of other types of travel-related sellers optimize revenue in a similar manner.

While conventional revenue management systems employ sophisticated tools to anticipate future travel needs, forecasting errors invariably lead to unanticipated excess capacity. In addition, a seller can utilize its revenue management system to forecast anticipated excess capacity, such as excess capacity on a given flight associated with seats that are predicted to be empty. Furthermore, unexpected external events, such as a price war or extreme weather conditions, can also affect a seller's excess capacity. Thus, in an attempt to reduce such excess capacity, sellers periodically reevalu-

ate the inventory allocation and pricing. Airlines and other travel-related sellers cannot simply discount the published prices for such unsold inventory, however, without either starting a price war or compromising their own underlying price structure (i.e., without also reducing its full-fare prices for business travelers). Thus, there is currently no effective way for airlines and other travel-related sellers to dispose of such excess capacity.

Although many airlines and other travel-related sellers attempt to dispose of excess capacity with "standby" or "wait-listed" travelers, this practice is typically limited to instances where some oversight on the part of either the traveler or the seller has occurred. For example, the traveler's flight may have been overbooked, the traveler may have missed an original flight, or the traveler may have purchased a ticket on a crowded flight at or near the time of departure. Moreover, standby travel is costly for the airline and is inconvenient for the traveler because there is no guarantee that the traveler will get to fly on the same day.

In addition, many sellers, including airlines and other travel-related sellers, attempt to sell excess capacity as part of a package at a discounted price. Packages may be assembled by the respective seller of the particular goods or services included in a package, or by a third party, such as a travel agent, who assembles packages of goods or services from multiple sellers. For a travel-related package, the packages may be predefined or assembled based on buyer specifications, such as travel dates and desired classes of service. Another method used by sellers to dispose of excess capacity is through the use of third parties, known as consolidators. In the airline environment, for example, the terms of the relationship between the airlines and the consolidators are generally not flight specific and are typically defined months in advance. Thus, the sale of airline tickets through a consolidator does not provide a sufficiently dynamic mechanism for airlines to sell such excess capacity when actual demand fails to meet forecasted demand. Even assuming that airlines and other sellers could release the tickets for sale through the consolidators at the last minute, there is currently no effective way for the consolidators to announce the availability and price of such inventory to buyers.

Airlines and other travel-related sellers recognize that there is a large source of latent demand associated with leisure travelers who are willing to travel at a favorable price. There is currently no effective way, however, for such sellers to receive an offer from a buyer for leisure travel at a particular price set by the buyer, below the seller's published price. In particular, there is no effective way for the seller to be confident that if the seller accepts the buyer's offer, the buyer will travel in accordance with the offer, without using the information to ascertain the seller's underlying level of price flexibility, which, if known to a seller's competitors or buyers, could dramatically impact the seller's overall revenue structure. Furthermore, when an offer is associated with a package of goods or services, the price flexibility of each individual component good or service within the package is even further shielded from the seller's competitors or buyers.

As apparent from the above deficiencies with conventional systems for selling goods and services, such as airline tickets and other travel-related services, a need exists for a system that permits a seller to sell excess capacity when actual demand fails to meet forecasted demand. A further need exists for a buyer-driven system that permits a buyer to obtain packages of goods and services at a price set by the buyer, at a total price typically below the published price of

each individual component of the package. Yet another need exists for a system that permits sellers to stimulate sales of excess inventory, without compromising the seller's published price structure. Another need exists for a system that permits sellers to capture and process consumer demand for each component item in a package, such that the selling price of each individual item cannot be determined by the buyer.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Generally, according to one aspect of the invention, a conditional purchase offer (CPO) management system is disclosed for receiving and processing CPOs from one or more buyers of packages of component goods or services. The package CPO management system preferably deconstructs an overall package CPO into component CPOs which are individually offered to sellers. The package CPO management system determines whether one or more sellers are willing to accept each of the individual components of a given package CPO. If each component CPO of a given package CPO is accepted, the package CPO management system binds the buyer, on behalf of each of the accepting sellers, to purchase the entire package.

In one embodiment, the package CPO management system reserves a margin off of the total offer price, before calculating the offer price for each component CPO. The reserved margin may be utilized, for example, to increase the offer price of one or more component CPOs that remain unaccepted by sellers. An offer price for each component CPO is calculated by initially determining the total market price of the package based on the market price of each individual component good or service within the package. The package CPO management system then calculates an offer price for each component CPO based on the total price offered by the buyer for the entire package (as adjusted by the margin, if necessary) multiplied by the ratio of the market price of the respective component CPO to the total market price of the package.

The individual component CPOs are processed to determine whether one or more sellers are willing to accept each of the individual component CPOs of the overall package CPO. The package CPO management system may filter the component CPOs provided to the various sellers, based, for example, on the industry associated with the component CPO, so that individual sellers only obtain component CPOs of interest. If each component is successfully accepted, the package CPO management system binds the buyer, on behalf of each of the accepting sellers, to purchase the entire package.

As each individual component CPO is accepted by a seller, the package CPO management system preferably enters a "pre-bind" agreement with the seller, whereby the component good or service is reserved for a predefined time period to permit the package CPO management system to complete the processing of the remaining active component CPOs. Alternatively, the package CPO management system can enter binding agreements with each seller who elects to accept a component CPO, and fund the difference to complete unaccepted components of the package before expiration at or near market prices. Component CPOs can also be provided to sellers in a particular serial order, based on the likelihood that each component of the package will bind.

According to one aspect of the present invention, the package CPO management system preferably provides an optional agency feature that permits the package CPO management system to accept or reject a given component

CPO on behalf of certain agency-based sellers who have delegated such authority to the package CPO management system. Thus, the package CPO management system can preferably provide one or more component CPOs of a received package CPO to each broadcast-based seller, for the seller to independently determine whether or not to accept a given component CPO. In addition, the package CPO management system can evaluate one or more component CPOs of a received package CPO against a number of CPO rules defined by one or more agency-based sellers, to decide on behalf of an agency-based seller to accept or reject a given component CPO. A CPO rule is a set of restrictions defined by a given agency-based seller, to define a combination of such restrictions for which the seller is willing to accept a predefined minimum price.

Once the terms of the package CPO have been received by the package CPO management system, the central controller will preferably execute a package CPO posting process to deconstruct the overall package CPO into component CPOs, and thereafter (i) provide each component CPO to the appropriate broadcast-based sellers and (ii) evaluate each component CPO against the appropriate CPO rules of each appropriate agency-based seller. In addition, once the component CPOs have been posted, the package CPO management system will preferably periodically execute a package CPO monitoring process to determine if each component CPO of an overall package CPO is accepted by an appropriate seller. If each of the individual component CPOs of a given package CPO are accepted by one or more sellers, the package CPO management system notifies and binds the buyer, on behalf of each of the accepting sellers, to purchase the entire package with the appropriate restrictions which meet the conditions defined by the buyer.

A more complete understanding of the present invention, as well as further features and advantages of the present invention, will be obtained by reference to the following detailed description and drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a schematic block diagram illustrating a package conditional purchase offer (CPO) management system in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 2 is a schematic block diagram of the exemplary central controller of FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 is a schematic block diagram of the exemplary secured server of FIG. 1;

FIG. 4 is a schematic block diagram of an exemplary buyer or seller interface of FIG. 1;

FIG. 5 illustrates a sample table from the buyer database of FIG. 2;

FIG. 6 illustrates a sample table from the seller database of FIG. 2;

FIG. 7 illustrates a sample table from the package CPO database of FIG. 2;

FIG. 8 illustrates a sample table from the component CPO database of FIG. 2;

FIG. 9 illustrates a sample table from the market price database of FIG. 2;

FIGS. 10a and 10b illustrate sample tables from the secured seller rules database of FIG. 3;

FIGS. 11a through 11c, collectively, are a flow chart describing an exemplary package CPO posting process implemented by the central controller of FIG. 2;

FIGS. 12a through 12c, collectively, are a flowchart describing an exemplary package CPO monitoring process implemented by the central controller of FIG. 2; and

FIG. 13 is a flow chart describing an exemplary component CPO rule evaluation process implemented by the secured server of FIG. 3.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

FIG. 1 shows a conditional purchase offer (CPO) management system for receiving and processing CPOs from one or more buyers, utilizing buyer interfaces **400**, for packages of component goods or services. In one embodiment, the package CPO management system **100** deconstructs or breaks up an overall package CPO into component CPOs which are individually offered to sellers. The package CPO management system **100** processes the individual component CPOs associated with each package CPO to determine whether one or more sellers, utilizing seller interfaces **401–406**, are willing to accept each of the individual components of a given package CPO. As discussed further below, if each of the individual component CPOs of a given package CPO are accepted by one or more sellers, the package CPO management system **100** binds the buyer, on behalf of each of the accepting sellers, to purchase the entire package. In this manner, a legally binding contract is formed.

As used herein, a package CPO is a binding offer containing one or more conditions submitted by a buyer for the purchase of a package of component goods or services or both, such as air travel, hotel and car rental, at a buyer-defined price. In the illustrative travel embodiment, the buyer-defined conditions for a package CPO would generally include overall price and itinerary parameters, such as the origin and destination cities; acceptable dates and times of travel; and desired class of service for each individual component. In addition, a buyer may optionally provide more detailed specifications for one or more individual components of an overall package CPO, such as whether connecting flights or stopovers are acceptable to the buyer for the airline portion of a travel-related package CPO, or a preferred provider for one or more individual component goods or services.

According to one feature of the present invention, the package CPO management system **100** preferably deconstructs an overall package CPO into component CPOs which are individually offered to sellers. In an alternate embodiment, the package CPO management system **100** provides the overall package CPO to each seller, with sellers being able to separately accept each component of the package CPO. It is noted that the individual components of a package CPO can be for identical products. For example, a buyer can submit a purchase offer for six (6) general admission tickets to a particular sporting event. The package CPO management system **100** can provide the purchase offer to sellers as an integral CPO for six tickets which may only be accepted by one seller. Alternatively, the package CPO management system **100** can deconstruct the overall package CPO for six tickets into a number of component CPOs for one or more tickets which are individually offered to sellers. In one implementation, an overall package CPO for bulk goods can be deconstructed into component CPOs which are optimized into units which are most likely to be accepted. In the above ticket example, the package CPO management system **100** can decompose the request for six tickets into three component CPOs for two tickets each, assuming that most sellers are looking to sell pairs of tickets.

In one preferred embodiment, the package CPO management system **100** reserves a margin off of the total offer price, before calculating the offer price for each component

CPO. The reserved margin amount may be determined based on the likelihood that all components of the overall package will be bound. In this manner, the margins mitigate the risk incurred by the package CPO management system **100** as a result of a failure to bind all components of a package CPO.

As discussed further below in conjunction with FIG. 12, the package CPO management system **100** can utilize the reserved margin or portions thereof to increase the offer price of one or more component CPOs that remain unaccepted by sellers. For example, if a buyer were to submit an offer for a vacation package with a total cost not to exceed one thousand dollars (\$1,000.00), the package CPO management system **100** may retain a one hundred dollar margin (\$100), or ten percent (10%), to utilize if components of the desired package cannot be bound with the offer prices allocated from the initial \$900. If, however, the package CPO management system **100** is successful in binding the entire package with the initially allocated \$900, then the package CPO management system **100** can retain the \$100 margin as profit, return the margin to the buyer, or place the unused margin in a fund to help bind the component CPOs of other package CPOs.

In order to calculate an offer price for each component CPO, the package CPO management system **100** preferably initially determines the total market price of the package based on the market price of each individual component good or service within the package. The package CPO management system **100** then calculates an offer price for each component CPO based on the total price offered by the buyer for the entire package, as adjusted by the reserved margin, if appropriate, multiplied by the ratio of the market price of the respective component CPO to the total market price of the package. For example, if a buyer submits an offer for a travel package consisting of air travel, hotel accommodations and a car rental, with a total cost for the package not to exceed one thousand dollars (\$1,000.00), and with each component item having a market price of \$420, \$400 and \$250, respectively, the package would have a total market price of \$1070. If a \$100 margin is initially retained by the package CPO management system **100**, the \$900 adjusted package CPO price would be allocated to the individual component CPOs as follows based on the market prices: \$360 (40%) for airline tickets, \$333 (37%) for hotel accommodations and \$207 (23%) for car rental.

The package CPO management system **100** then processes the individual component CPOs to determine whether one or more sellers are willing to accept each of the individual component CPOs of the overall package CPO. If successful, the package CPO management system **100** binds the buyer, on behalf of each of the accepting sellers, to purchase the entire package. As discussed further below, as each individual component CPO is accepted by a seller, the package CPO management system **100** preferably enters a “pre-bind” agreement with the seller, whereby the component good or service is reserved for a predefined time period to permit the package CPO management system **100** to complete the processing of the remaining active component CPOs. A seller who accepts a component CPO may permit the package CPO management system **100**, for example, a two-week period within which the package CPO management system **100** must complete the package. It is noted that such a limited predefined “pre-bind” period protects sellers from reserving a product that cannot be later sold.

In an alternate implementation, the package CPO management system **100** can enter binding agreements with each seller who elects to accept a component CPO. In this implementation, if parts of the package were bound, and

others were not at the time of expiration, the package CPO management system **100** could fund the difference to complete the unaccepted components of the package at or near market prices. In a further alternate implementation, the package CPO management system **100** can provide component CPOs to sellers in a particular serial order, based on the likelihood that each component of the package will bind.

In addition, a seller can preferably be ensured that the package CPO management system **100** could not continue shopping an accepted component CPO to the seller's competitors after a pre-bind is obtained by encrypting the initial pre-bind. For example, a seller who pre-binds a given component CPO can encrypt their identifying characteristics before transmitting their acceptance to the package CPO management system **100** so that the package CPO management system **100** can identify the seller's industry, such as airline, and authorization to accept offers, but could not identify the seller's specific identity until the entire package was complete.

Although the package CPO management system **100** is illustrated herein as a system for processing travel-related package CPOs, the package CPO management system **100** could be utilized to process packages of any component goods or services or both, such as automobiles and related insurance, computers and related peripheral equipment, or bulk goods, as would be apparent to a person of ordinary skill.

Package CPO Management System

As shown in FIG. 1, the package CPO management system **100** preferably includes a central controller **200** and one or more secured servers **300**, for communicating with one or more buyer or seller interfaces **400–406**. The package CPO management system **100** may provide a given component CPO to selected sellers based on the industry associated with the component CPO or other predefined screening criteria, as shown in FIG. 1, so that sellers only obtain component CPOs that they may be interested in or are authorized to screen. Alternatively, the package CPO management system may provide all component CPOs to all sellers for screening.

According to one feature of the present invention, the package CPO management system **100** preferably provides an optional agency feature that permits the package CPO management system **100** to accept or reject a given component CPO on behalf of certain agency-based sellers who have delegated such authority to the package CPO management system **100**. Thus, the package CPO management system **100** preferably (i) evaluates component CPOs on behalf of certain agency-based sellers who have delegated authority to the package CPO management system **100** to accept or reject a given component CPO, and (ii) permits broadcast-based sellers to evaluate component CPOs independently. Thus, the package CPO management system **100** can preferably provide one or more component CPOs of a received package CPO to each broadcast-based seller, for the seller to independently determine whether or not to accept a given component CPO. It is noted that the package CPO management system **100** can provide a component CPO to each appropriate broadcast-based seller, for example, by means of a broadcast transmission, or by means of posting the component CPO, for example, on an electronic bulletin board accessible by each broadcast-based seller. Alternatively, the package CPO management system **100** can evaluate one or more component CPOs of a received package CPO against a number of CPO rules defined by one

or more agency-based sellers, to decide on behalf of an agency-based seller to accept or reject a given component CPO. Thus, the package CPO management system **100** can determine if one or more sellers accepts a given component CPO by providing the component CPO to each seller and receiving an acceptance or rejection, or by applying the component CPO to the CPO rules to render a decision to either accept, reject or counter a component CPO on behalf of a particular seller.

As discussed further below, a CPO rule is a set of restrictions defined by a given agency-based seller, such as seller **404**, to define a combination of such restrictions for which the seller is willing to accept a predefined minimum price. In one embodiment, the CPO rules are generated by the revenue management system, yield management system, or profit management system of the respective agency-based seller, or by any system that controls and manages inventory. For a more detailed discussion of CPO rules, the manner in which they are generated and related security issues, see U.S. patent application Ser. No. 08/889,319, entitled Conditional Purchase Offer Management System, filed Jul. 8, 1997, the parent application to the present invention, which is incorporated by reference herein. Generally, the revenue management system, for example, will employ a CPO rules generation process to generate CPO rules by evaluating current inventory, pricing and revenue information, as well as historical patterns and external events, to forecast future travel.

For example, a CPO rule for a given agency-based airline can specify that the airline will accept any component CPO for travel between Newark, N.J. (EWR) and Orlando, Fla. (MCO) during the month of October, 1997, provided that (i) the customer travels between Tuesday and Thursday, (ii) the tickets are booked within 21 days of departure, (iii) the price is at least \$165 per ticket, (iv) K-class inventory is available on all flight segments of the customer's itinerary, and (v) there are at least two (2) passengers travelling together.

As discussed further below in conjunction with FIG. 3, each secured server **300** may be associated with one or more agency-based sellers and each server **300** stores, among other things, the CPO rules defined by any associated agency-based sellers, such as sellers **404** and **406**. Each secured server **300** may be remotely located from the central controller **200**, as shown in FIG. 1, or may be integrated with the central controller **200**. In one remote embodiment, the secured server **300** associated with each agency-based seller may be physically located at a processing facility secured by the particular seller, or at the physical location of a third party.

As discussed further below, each buyer contacts the package CPO management system **100**, for example, by means of telephone, facsimile, online access, e-mail, in-person contact or through an agent, and provides the package CPO management system **100** with the terms of their package CPO. It is noted that each buyer may employ a general-purpose computer, such as the buyer interface **400**, discussed below in conjunction with FIG. 4, for communicating with the package CPO management system **100**. The general-purpose computer of each buyer is preferably comprised of a processing unit, a modem, memory means in and any software required to communicate with the package CPO management system **100**.

Once the terms of the package CPO have been received by the package CPO management system **100**, the central controller **200** will execute a package CPO posting process **1100**, discussed below in conjunction with FIGS. **11a**

through 11c, to deconstruct the overall package CPO into component CPOs, and thereafter (i) provide each component CPO to the appropriate broadcast-based sellers and (ii) evaluate each component CPO against the appropriate CPO rules of each appropriate agency-based seller. In addition, once the component CPOs have been posted, the package CPO management system 100 will preferably periodically execute a package CPO monitoring process 1200, discussed further below in conjunction with FIGS. 12a through 12c, to determine if each component CPO of an overall package CPO is accepted by an appropriate seller. If each of the individual component CPOs of a given package CPO are accepted by one or more sellers, the package CPO management system 100 notifies the buyer, on behalf of each of the accepting sellers, that he has been bound to purchase the entire package with the appropriate restrictions which meet the conditions defined by the buyer.

The package CPO management system 100 and buyer and seller interfaces 400–406 (collectively, the “nodes”) preferably transmit digitally encoded data and other information between one another. The communication links between the nodes preferably comprise a cable, fiber or wireless link on which electronic signals can propagate. For example, each node may be connected via an Internet connection using a public switched telephone network (PSTN), such as those provided by a local or regional telephone operating company. Alternatively, each node may be connected by dedicated data lines, cellular, Personal Communication Systems (“PCS”), microwave, or satellite networks.

FIG. 2 is a block diagram showing the architecture of an illustrative central controller 200. The central controller 200 preferably includes certain standard hardware components, such as a central processing unit (CPU) 205, a random access memory (RAM) 210, a read only memory (ROM) 220, a clock 225, a data storage device 230, an operating system 250, a payment processor 260 and a network interface 280. The CPU 205 is preferably linked to each of the other listed elements, either by means of a shared data bus, or dedicated connections, as shown in FIG. 2.

The CPU 205 may be embodied as a single commercially available processor, such as Intel’s Pentium 100 MHz P54C microprocessor, Motorola’s 120 MHz PowerPC 604 microprocessor or Sun Microsystem’s 166 MHz UltraSPARC-1 microprocessor. Alternatively, the CPU 205 may be embodied as a number of such processors operating in parallel.

The ROM 220 and/or data storage device 230 are operable to store one or more instructions, discussed further below in conjunction with FIGS. 11 and 12, which the CPU 205 is operable to retrieve, interpret and execute. The payment processor 260 preferably implements known processes to accomplish the transfer of required payments, charges and debits, between the sellers and buyers, by means of a conventional electronic funds transfer (EFF) network. In particular, as discussed below in conjunction with FIG. 12, the package CPO monitoring process 1200 preferably transmits the credit card information associated with a given buyer to the credit card issuer for payment, if a package is actually purchased by the buyer. The processing of such accounting transactions are preferably secured in a conventional manner, for example, using well-known cryptographic techniques.

The CPU 205 preferably includes a control unit, an arithmetic logic unit (ALU), and a CPU local memory storage device, such as, for example, a stackable cache or a plurality of registers, in a known manner. The control unit is operable to retrieve instructions from the data storage device

230 or ROM 220. The ALU is operable to perform a plurality of operations needed to carry out instructions. The CPU local memory storage device is operable to provide high-speed storage used for storing temporary results and control information.

As discussed further below in conjunction with FIGS. 5 through 9, respectively, the data storage device 230 includes a buyer database 500, a seller database 600, a package CPO database 700, a component CPO database 800 and a market price database 900. The buyer database 500 preferably stores information on each buyer of the package CPO management system 100, including biographical information and billing information, such as a credit card number. The seller database 600 preferably stores information on each seller which is registered with the package CPO management system 100 to sell component goods or services to package CPO buyers, including identifier and name information. The package CPO database 700 preferably contains a record of each package CPO being processed by the package CPO management system 100, including an indication of the component CPOs within each package CPO and the associated status. The component CPO database 800 preferably contains a record of each component CPO being processed by the package CPO management system 100, including the terms of each component CPO and the associated status. Finally, the market price database 900 preferably stores market price information for each component good or service processed by the package CPO management system 100.

In addition, the data storage device 230 includes a package CPO posting process 1100 and a package CPO monitoring process 1200, discussed further below in conjunction with FIGS. 11 and 12, respectively. Generally, the package CPO posting process 1100 deconstructs the package CPO into component goods or services, and thereafter (i) posts each component CPO to the appropriate broadcast-based sellers and (ii) evaluates each component CPO against the appropriate CPO rules of each agency-based seller. The package CPO monitoring process 1200 determines if each component CPO of a posted package CPO is accepted by an appropriate seller and, if accepted, provides buyer information to each accepting seller. In this manner, if each of the individual component CPOs of a given package CPO are accepted, the package CPO management system 100 notifies the buyer, on behalf of each of the accepting sellers, that he has been bound to purchase the entire package.

The network interface 280 connects the central controller 200 to the buyer and sellers, for example, by means of an Internet connection using the public switched telephone network (PSTN). The network interface 280 preferably includes multiple communication channels for simultaneously establishing a plurality of connections.

FIG. 3 is a block diagram showing the architecture of an illustrative secured server 300. As previously indicated, the package CPO management system 100 may utilize one or more secured servers 300, each supporting one or more agency-based sellers 404, 406. Each secured server 300 preferably includes certain standard hardware components, such as a central processing unit (CPU) 305, a random access memory (RAM) 310, a read only memory (ROM) 320, a clock 325, a data storage device 330, and a communications port 340. Each of these components may be identical to those described above in conjunction with FIG. 2.

As previously indicated, in one embodiment, the CPO rules may be stored in a secure database to maintain the

integrity and confidentiality of the highly sensitive information included in each CPO rule. Thus, the secured server **300** preferably uses a secure database, such as the products commercially available from Oracle, Informix or IBM.

As discussed further below in conjunction with FIG. 10, the data storage device **330** includes a secured seller rules database **1000**. The secured seller rules database **1000** preferably maintains the CPO rules for the one or more agency-based sellers associated with the secured server **300**. As previously indicated, the secured seller rules database **1000** may be stored in an encrypted format to maintain the integrity and confidentiality of the highly sensitive information included in the CPO rules. In addition, the data storage device **330** includes a component CPO rule evaluation process **1300**, discussed further below in conjunction with FIG. 13. Generally, the component CPO rule evaluation process **1300** is a subroutine executed by the package CPO posting process **1100**, which receives a component CPO and compares the CPO against the rules of one or more agency-based sellers to generate a response on behalf of the sellers to the given component CPO.

The secured server **300** may optionally maintain an audit trail for each component CPO that is processed by the package CPO management system **100**. For a discussion of a suitable audit system, see the parent application to the present invention, incorporated by reference herein above.

The communications port **340** connects the secured server **300** to the central controller **200**. The communications port **340** preferably includes multiple communication channels for simultaneously establishing a plurality of connections.

FIG. 4 is a block diagram showing the architecture of an illustrative buyer or seller interface **400-406**. The interface **400** preferably includes certain standard hardware components, such as a central processing unit (CPU) **408**, a random access memory (RAM) **410**, a read only memory (ROM) **420**, a clock **425**, a data storage device **430**, and a communications port **440**. Each of these components may be identical to those described above in conjunction with FIG. 2. In addition, the interface **400** preferably includes a video monitor **450** and related video driver **460**, and an input device **470**, such as a keyboard or mouse

The data storage device **430** preferably includes a message database **480** for storing messages required by the respective buyer or seller interface **400-406** to communicate with the central controller **200** of the package CPO management system **100**. The communications port **440** connects the interface **400** to the central controller **200** or the secured server **300**, for broadcast-based and agency-based sellers, respectively.

FIG. 5 illustrates an exemplary buyer database **500** that preferably stores information on each buyer of the package CPO management system **100**, including biographical information and billing information, such as a credit card number. The buyer database **500** maintains a plurality of records, such as records **505-515**, each associated with a different buyer. For each buyer identifier in field **520**, the buyer database **500** includes the corresponding buyer name and address in fields **525** and **530**, respectively, and credit card number in field **535**. In addition, the buyer database **500** preferably includes an indication of the CPOs associated with the buyer in field **540**, which may be package CPOs as described herein or general CPOs as described in the parent application to the present invention. The identifier stored in field **520** may be utilized, for example, to index a historical database (not shown) of previous purchases and CPOs associated with the buyer.

FIG. 6 illustrates an exemplary seller database **600** which preferably stores information on each seller which is registered with the package CPO management system **100** to sell component goods or services to package CPO buyers, including identifier and name information. The seller database **600** maintains a plurality of records, such as records **605-630**, each associated with a different seller. For each seller identifier listed in field **635**, the seller database **600** includes the corresponding seller name in field **640**. In addition, the seller database **600** preferably records a tracking number in field **645** for any CPOs associated with each seller. It is noted that the information recorded in field **645** could be similarly recorded by including a seller ID field in the package CPO database **700**, discussed below.

FIG. 7 illustrates a package CPO database **700** which preferably contains a record of each package CPO being processed by the package CPO management system **100**, including an indication of the component CPOs within each package CPO and the associated status. The package CPO database **700** maintains a plurality of records, such as records **705-710**, each associated with a different package CPO. For each package CPO listed in field **720**, the package CPO database **700** includes the status and original offer price in fields **725** and **730**, respectively. In addition, the package CPO database **700** preferably records the margin factor, remaining margin, adjusted package CPO price and per-allocation-margin percentage in fields **735** through **750**, respectively. The manner in which the margin variables are processed by the package CPO management system **100** are discussed below in conjunction with FIG. 12. The posting and expiration dates of the package CPO, as well as the total posting duration period and posting time required for each margin allocation are stored in fields **755** through **770**, respectively. The individual component goods or services within each package CPO are optionally identified in field **775**, and the conditions and component numbers associated with each component are set forth in fields **780** and **785**. It is noted that the information recorded in fields **775** and **780** could alternatively be retrieved from the component CPO database **800** using the component CPO numbers recorded in field **785**. Finally, an identifier of the buyer associated with each package CPO is preferably recorded in field **790**.

FIG. 8 illustrates an exemplary component CPO database **800** which preferably contains a record for each component CPO being processed by the package CPO management system **100**, including the terms of the component CPO and the associated status. The component CPO database **800** maintains a plurality of records, such as records **805** through **830**, each associated with a different component CPO being processed by the system **100**. For each component CPO identified by component CPO number in field **840**, the component CPO database **800** includes the status or expiration date for pre-bound component CPOs in field **845**, as well as the corresponding subject, price and conditions associated with the component CPO in fields **850** through **860**, respectively. Finally, an identifier of the buyer associated with each component CPO is preferably recorded in field **865**.

FIG. 9 illustrates an exemplary market price database **900** that preferably stores market price information for each component good or service processed by the package CPO management system **100**. As discussed further below in conjunction with FIG. 11, the package CPO posting process **1100** preferably utilizes the market price information to allocate the overall package price to each component good or service. The market price database **900** maintains a plurality of records, such as records **905** through **945**, each

associated with a different component good or service processed by the system **100**. For each component good or service identified in field **960**, the market price database **900** identifies the available quality or service levels for each good or service in field **965**, as well as the corresponding market price set forth in field **975**, for each time period indicated in field **970**. It is noted that the market price for each service level of round trip airline travel is preferably recorded for each originating and destination city pair (O & D Pair).

As previously indicated, the secured server **300** preferably maintains one or more secured seller rules databases **1000** to store the CPO rules for the one or more agency-based sellers associated with the secured server **300**. An example of a secured seller rules database **1000** is shown in FIG. **10a** for an agency-based airline and in FIG. **10b** for an agency-based hotel.

FIG. **10a** illustrates an exemplary secured airline rules database **1000** which preferably maintains the CPO rules for one or more agency-based airlines associated with a particular secured server **300**. As previously indicated, the secured airline rules database **1000** may be stored in an encrypted format to maintain the integrity and confidentiality of the highly sensitive information included in the CPO rules. The secured airline rules database **1000** maintains a plurality of records, such as records **1002** and **1004**, each associated with a different CPO rule. For each CPO rule identified by rule number in field **1010**, the secured airline rules database **1000** includes the associated restrictions defined by the respective agency-based airline in fields **1012** through **1044**.

FIG. **10b** illustrates an exemplary secured hotel rules database **1050** which preferably maintains the CPO rules for one or more agency-based hotels associated with a particular secured server **300**. As previously indicated, the secured hotel rules database **1050** may be stored in an encrypted format to maintain the integrity and confidentiality of the highly sensitive information included in the CPO rules. The secured hotel rules database **1050** maintains a plurality of records, such as records **1052** through **1056**, each associated with a different CPO rule. For each CPO rule identified by rule number in field **1060**, the secured hotel rules database **1050** identifies the applicable hotel sites in field **1065** and includes the associated restrictions defined by the respective agency-based hotel in fields **1070** through **1090**.

As discussed above, the central controller **200** preferably executes a package CPO posting process **1100**, shown in FIGS. **11a** through **11c**, to deconstruct the package CPO into component goods or services, and thereafter (i) post each component CPO to the appropriate broadcast-based sellers and (ii) evaluate each component CPO against the appropriate CPO rules of each agency-based seller. As illustrated in FIG. **11a**, the package CPO posting process **1100** begins the processes embodying the principles of the present invention during step **1105**, when a buyer submits a CPO for a package of component goods or services.

Thereafter, the central controller **200** will receive the conditions associated with the package CPO from the buyer, including a description of each component good or service, and an identifier of a general purpose account, such as a credit or debit card account from which funds may be paid during step **1110**, and then receive the price and expiration date for the package CPO from the buyer during step **1115**. In this manner, the offer is guaranteed with a general purpose account, for example, using a line of credit on a credit card account. Appropriate legal language is preferably displayed

or read to the buyer during step **1120** to form a binding package CPO. A package CPO number is generated during step **1125**, and the package CPO information, including the buyer identifier, package CPO price and expiration date, and conditions for the component goods or services, is then entered into the package CPO database **700** during step **1130**.

As previously indicated, the package CPO management system **100** preferably reserves a margin off of the total package offer price, before calculating the offer price for each component CPO. Thus, an appropriate margin is calculated during step **1135** by multiplying the package CPO price by the margin factor recorded in the package CPO database **700**. Thereafter, the calculated margin is recorded in the "remaining margin" field **740** of the package CPO database **700** during step **1140** (FIG. **11b**). The adjusted CPO price is then calculated by subtracting the calculated margin from the original total package offer price, which is then entered into the package CPO database **700** during step **1145**. The status of the package CPO is set to "active" in field **725** of the package CPO database **700** during step **1150**.

The market price of each component good or service in the package CPO is retrieved during step **1155** from the market price database **900**. The market price of the overall package CPO is calculated during step **1160** by adding the market price of each individual component CPO in the overall package. The individual CPO prices for each component CPO are then calculated during step **1165**, for example, by allocating the adjusted package CPO price, as calculated during step **1145**, in accordance with the ratio of the market price of the respective component good or service to the total market price.

A CPO number is then generated for each component CPO during step **1170** and recorded in the "component CPO numbers" field of the package CPO database **700** during step **1175** (FIG. **11c**). A new record is created in the component CPO database **800** for each component CPO during step **1180**, before each component CPO is provided to each broadcast-based seller and the component CPO rule evaluation process **1300** is executed for each agency-based seller during step **1190**. Program control terminates during step **1195**.

As discussed above, the central controller **200** preferably executes a package CPO monitoring process **1200**, shown in FIGS. **12a** through **12c**, to determine if each component CPO of a posted package CPO has been accepted by an appropriate seller and, if accepted, provides buyer information to each accepting seller. In this manner, if each of the individual component CPOs of a given package CPO are accepted, the package CPO management system **100** notifies and binds the buyer, on behalf of each of the accepting sellers, to purchase the entire package. The package CPO monitoring process **1200** may be periodically executed to determine the status of each component CPO, or executed continuously.

As illustrated in FIG. **12a**, the package CPO monitoring process **1200** begins the processes embodying the principles of the present invention during step **1205**, by performing a test to determine if all of the component CPOs within a given package CPO have been prebound at currently posted prices. It is noted that in the illustrative embodiment, the first seller to accept a given component CPO is awarded the component CPO. For a discussion of other mechanisms for determining which seller among a plurality of accepting sellers should be awarded a component CPO, see the parent application to the present invention, incorporated by refer-

ence herein above. If it is determined during step **1205** that all of the component CPOs within a given package CPO have been pre-bound at currently posted prices, then buyer identification information, including the buyer's name, address and credit card account number, is retrieved from the buyer database **500** during step **1250**. Thereafter, the buyer identification number is transmitted to each seller who accepted a component CPO during step **1255**. The package CPO monitoring process **1200** transmits the merchant identifier of the package CPO management system **100**, together with the buyer's credit card account number, a billing descriptor and the purchase amount for the package CPO to the credit card issuer for payment authorization during step **1260**, via a conventional credit card authorization network.

The status field **725** of the package CPO database **700** is updated during step **1265** to indicate that the respective package CPO was completed, before program control terminates during step **1270**.

If, however, it was determined during step **1205** that all of the component CPOs within a given package CPO have not been pre-bound at currently posted prices, then the expiration date of the package CPO is retrieved from field **760** of the package CPO database **700** during step **1210** (FIG. **12b**). A test is then performed during step **1215** to determine if the package CPO has expired. If it is determined during step **1215** that the package CPO has expired, without each component being pre-bound, then the package CPO monitoring process **1200** communicates (1) termination of any pre-bind agreements for component CPOs within the expired package CPO which were accepted by one or more sellers to the respective sellers during step **1235**; and (11) expiration of the package CPO to the respective buyer during step **1240**. In an alternate embodiment, the buyer can be invited to resubmit a revised package CPO if the original package CPO is not accepted. In addition, the package CPO management system **100** might attempt to compile a counteroffer for the buyer, based on acceptances of individual components received by the package CPO management system **100**. Thereafter, program control terminates during step **1245**.

If, however, it is determined during step **1215** that the package CPO has not expired, then the package CPO monitoring process **1200** will adjust the status field **725** of the package CPO database **700** during step **1220** to indicate the percentage of the overall package CPO which is currently pre-bound, for example, by accessing the package CPO database **700** to identify the number of components in the package CPO, and identifying the number of components which are currently pre-bound. Thereafter, the "total posting duration" parameter is retrieved from field **765** of the package CPO database **700** during step **1225**, which is then multiplied by the "posting time required for each margin allocation" parameter set forth in field **770**.

A test is then performed during step **1230** to determine if the package CPO has been active for the posting time required to allocate additional margin to increase the price of each component CPO which has not yet been pre-bound. If it is determined during step **1230** that the package CPO has not been active for the posting time required to allocate additional margin, then program control returns to step **1205** (FIG. **12a**) and continues processing in the manner described above. If, however, it is determined during step **1230** that the package CPO has been active for the posting time required to allocate additional margin, then the percent composition of each remaining active component CPO is calculated during step **1275** (FIG. **12c**) relative to the total price of all remaining active component CPOs.

The "per allocation margin percentage" is then retrieved during step **1280** from field **750** of the package CPO database **700**. The amount of margin to be allocated to remaining active component CPOs is then calculated during step **1282** by multiplying the retrieved "per allocation margin percentage" value by "remaining margin" value recorded in field **740** of the package CPO database **700**. Thereafter, the allocable margin is applied to each remaining active component CPO in appropriate percentages during step **1284** by multiplying the price percentages of the remaining active component CPOs (as determined during step **1275**) by the calculated allocable margin amount.

For example, if one component of a three component package is initially prebound at the originally posted price, and the remaining two components are not bound within the posting time required to allocate additional margin, then the package CPO monitoring process **1200** preferably allocates part of the margin between the two remaining component CPOs. The amount allocated to each component CPO is preferably determined by their respective initially posted prices. Assume in the example discussed above, where a buyer submits an offer for a travel package consisting of air travel, hotel accommodations and a car rental, with a total cost for the package not to exceed one thousand dollars (\$1,000.00), that the first component to prebind was the airline tickets at \$360. Thus, the package CPO monitoring process **1200** will allocate a portion of the remaining margin to the offer prices for the hotel and car rental component CPOs. In a preferred embodiment, since the hotel component CPO accounts for 62% of the total remaining CPO prices ($\$333/(\$333+\$207)$), the offer price of the hotel component CPO is increased by 62%, or \$31, of the money taken from the margin (\$50). Likewise, the car rental component CPO offer price would be increased by 38% or \$19. If one or more components are again not bound for the posting time required to allocate additional margin, more of the margin is preferably allocated.

The "remaining margin" recorded in field **740** is adjusted during step **1288** by subtracting the margin allocated in the previous step. Thereafter, during step **1290**, the remaining active CPOs with the newly adjusted prices are provided to broadcast-based sellers and the component CPO rule evaluation process **1300** is executed for each appropriate agency-based seller. Finally, program control returns to step **1205** (FIG. **12a**) and continues processing in the manner described above, until all component CPOs are pre-bound, or until the package CPO expires. In this manner, the offer prices are increased with additional allocated margin for each component CPO that remains unaccepted for each time period required to allocate additional margin. As discussed above, the package CPO posting process **1100** and the package CPO monitoring process **1200** each execute a component CPO rule evaluation process **1300**, during steps **1190** and **1290**, respectively, for agency-based sellers to compare the component CPOs against the rules of one or more agency-based sellers to generate a response on behalf of the sellers to the given component CPO. An illustrative component CPO rule evaluation process **1300** is shown in FIG. **13**. In one embodiment, the component CPO rule evaluation process **1300** is customized for each agency-based seller, so that each evaluation process **1300** receives the component CPO record from the central controller **200** in a standard format for comparison against the rules of the associated seller, and returns a standard response of the seller to the component CPO, such as "accept" or "reject."

As shown in FIG. **13**, the component CPO rule evaluation process **1300** initially identifies all CPO rules in the secured

seller rules database 1000 which are pertinent to the component CPO during step 1310. Thereafter, during step 1320, the buyer defined conditions from the component CPO record in the component CPO database 800 are then compared to the corresponding seller defined restrictions from the secured seller rules database 1000 during step 1320, for each CPO rule identified during the previous step.

Thereafter, a test is performed during step 1330 to determine if the component CPO satisfies a CPO rule. If it is determined during step 1330 that the component CPO does not satisfy one CPO rule, then program control terminates during step 1370. If, however, it is determined during step 1330 that the component CPO does satisfy a CPO rule, then the component CPO number is retrieved from the component CPO database 800 during step 1340, and then entered into the "CPO tracking number" field 645 of the seller database 600. The status of the component CPO in field 845 of the component CPO database 800 is updated to "pre-bind completed" during step 1360, before program control terminates during step 1370. In addition, a pre-bind expiration date can be added to field 845, if mandated by the seller.

It is to be understood that the embodiments and variations shown and described herein are merely illustrative of the principles of this invention and that various modifications may be implemented by those skilled in the art without departing from the scope and spirit of the invention.

For example, as previously indicated, although the present invention has been illustrated in a travel environment, the package CPO management system 100 could be utilized to sell any packages of any component goods or services, as would be apparent to a person of ordinary skill.

We claim:

1. A method of using a computer to process the sale of a package of component items, comprising the steps of:
 - obtaining, using said computer, a purchase offer for said package from a customer, said purchase offer containing a description of each component item and a payment identifier for specifying a general-purpose account from which funds may be paid;
 - deconstructing by said computer said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers each having a component price;
 - providing said component purchase offers to a plurality of potential sellers;
 - receiving from one or more of said sellers an acceptance of said component purchase offers;
 - binding said customer to purchase said package if an acceptance is received for each of said component purchase offers; and
 - preventing said customer from identifying said component price.
2. The method according to claim 1, further comprising the step of initiating the use of said payment identifier to collect said funds.
3. The method according to claim 1, wherein said component purchase offers are offered at a component price.
4. The method according to claim 1, wherein said purchase offer includes a total price and a portion of said total price is reserved as a margin.
5. The method according to claim 1, further comprising filtering said component purchase offers provided to said sellers based on the industry associated with each component purchase offer and the industry of said sellers.
6. A method of using a computer to process the sale of a package of component items, comprising the steps of:
 - obtaining, using a computer, a purchase offer for said package from a customer, said purchase offer contain-

ing a description of each component item and a payment identifier for specifying a general-purpose account from which funds may be paid;

deconstructing by said computer said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers each having a component price, and wherein said component price of each component is based on the percentage of the market value of the component item to the market value of the package;

providing said component purchase offers to a plurality of potential sellers;

receiving from one or more of said sellers an acceptance of said component purchase offers; and

binding said customer to purchase said package if an acceptance is received for each of said component purchase offers.

7. The method according to claim 1, further comprising the step of entering a preliminary agreement with each seller accepting a component purchase offer, whereby the component item associated with said accepted component purchase offer is reserved for a predefined time period.

8. A method of using a computer to process the sale of a package of component items, comprising the steps of:

- obtaining, using said computer, a purchase offer for said package from a customer, said purchase offer containing a description of each component item and a payment identifier for specifying a general-purpose account from which funds may be paid;

- deconstructing by said computer said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers each having a component price;

- providing said component purchase offers to a plurality of potential sellers;

- increasing the component price of one or more of said component purchase offers that remain unaccepted by said sellers after a predefined time period;

- receiving from one or more of said sellers an acceptance of said component purchase offers;

- binding said customer to purchase said package if an acceptance is received for each of said component purchase offers.

9. A method of using a computer to process the sale of a package of component items, comprising the steps of:

- obtaining, using said computer, a purchase offer for said package from a customer, said purchase offer containing a description of each component item and a payment identifier for specifying a general-purpose account from which funds may be paid;

- deconstructing by said computer said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers;

- providing said component purchase offers to a plurality of potential sellers, in a serial order based on the likelihood that each component item of the package will be accepted by a seller;

- receiving from one or more of said sellers an acceptance of said component purchase offers; and

- binding said customer to purchase said package if an acceptance is received for each of said component purchase offers.

10. A method of using a computer to process the sale of a package of component items, comprising the steps of:

- obtaining, using said computer, a purchase offer for said package from a customer, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition for each of said component items and a total price;

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deconstructing by said computer said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers each having a component price;

identifying one or more rules from a plurality of sellers of said component items, each of said rules containing one or more seller-defined restrictions;

comparing one or more of said component purchase offers to said rules to determine whether any of said sellers is willing to accept said component purchase offer if said customer-defined condition satisfies said seller-defined restrictions of at least one of said rules;

providing said package of component items to said customer if each of said component purchase offers is acceptable; and

preventing said customer from identifying said component price.

11. The method according to claim 10, wherein said component purchase offers are offered at a component price.

12. The method according to claim 10, further comprising the step of entering a preliminary agreement with each seller accepting a component purchase offer, whereby the component item associated with said accepted component purchase offer is reserved for a predefined time period.

13. The method according to claim 10, wherein said purchase offer includes a total price and a portion of said total price is reserved as a margin.

14. The method according to claim 10, further comprising filtering said component purchase offers provided to said sellers based on the industry associated with each component purchase offer and the industry of said sellers.

15. The method according to claim 10, wherein said component purchase offers are provided to said sellers in a serial order based on the likelihood that each component item of the package will be accepted by a seller.

16. A method of using a computer to process the sale of a package of component items, comprising the steps of:

obtaining, using said computer, a purchase offer for said package from a customer, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition for each of said component items;

deconstructing by said computer said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers each having a component price, wherein said component price of each component is based on the percentage of the market value of the component item to the market value of the package;

identifying one or more rules from a plurality of sellers of said component items, said rules containing one or more seller-defined restrictions;

comparing one or more of said component purchase offers to said rules to determine whether any of said sellers is willing to accept said component purchase offer if said customer-defined condition satisfies said seller-defined restrictions of at least one of said rules; and

providing said package of component items to said customer if each of said component purchase offers is acceptable.

17. A method of using a computer to process the sale of a package of component items, comprising the steps of:

obtaining, using said computer, a purchase offer for said package from a customer, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition for each of said component items;

deconstructing by said computer said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers;

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identifying one or more rules from a plurality of sellers of said component items, said rules containing one or more seller-defined restrictions;

comparing one or more of said component purchase offers to said rules to determine whether any of said sellers is willing to accept said component purchase offer if said customer-defined condition satisfies said seller-defined restrictions of at least one of said rules;

increasing the component price of one or more of said component purchase offers that remain unaccepted by said sellers after a predefined time period; and

providing said package of component items to said customer if each of said component purchase offers is acceptable.

18. A method of using a computer to process the sale of a package of component items, comprising the steps of:

obtaining, using said computer, a purchase offer for said package from a customer, said purchase offer containing a description of each component item;

deconstructing said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers;

providing each of said component purchase offers to a plurality of potential sellers;

receiving from one or more of said sellers an acceptance of each of said component purchase offers at a component price; and

preventing said customer from identifying said component price.

19. The method according to claim 18, wherein said component purchase offers are offered at a component offer price.

20. The method according to claim 19, wherein said component offer price of each component is based on the percentage of the market value of the component item to the market value of the total package.

21. The method according to claim 19, further comprising the step of increasing the component offer price of one or more of said component purchase offers that remain unaccepted by said sellers after a predefined time period.

22. The method according to claim 18, further comprising the step of entering a preliminary agreement with each seller accepting a component purchase offer, whereby the component item associated with said accepted component purchase offer is reserved for a predefined time period.

23. The method according to claim 18, wherein said purchase offer includes a total price and a portion of said total price is reserved as a margin.

24. The method according to claim 18, further comprising the step of filtering said component purchase offers provided to said sellers based on the industry associated with each component purchase offer and the industry of said sellers.

25. The method according to claim 18, wherein said component purchase offers are provided to said sellers in a serial order based on the likelihood that each component item of the package will be accepted by a seller.

26. A method of using a computer to process the sale of a package of component items, comprising the steps of:

obtaining, using said computer, a purchase offer for said package from a customer, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition for each of said component items and a total price;

deconstructing by said computer said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers each having a component price;

providing each of said component purchase offers to a plurality of potential sellers;

receiving from one or more of said sellers an acceptance of each of said component purchase offers at a component price and an identification of a component product satisfying said customer-defined condition; binding said customer to purchase said package if an acceptance is received for each of said component purchase offers; and preventing said customer from identifying said component price.

27. The method according to claim 26, wherein said component purchase offers are offered at a component price.

28. The method according to claim 26, further comprising the step of entering a preliminary agreement with each seller accepting a component purchase offer, whereby the component item associated with said accepted component purchase offer is reserved for a predefined time period.

29. The method according to claim 26, wherein a portion of said total price is reserved as a margin.

30. The method according to claim 26, further comprising the step of filtering said component purchase offers provided to said sellers based on the industry associated with each component purchase offer and the industry of said sellers.

31. A method of using a computer to process the sale of a package of component items, comprising the steps of:

- obtaining, using said computer, a purchase offer for said package from a customer, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition for each of said component items and a total price;
- deconstructing by said computer said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers each having a component price, and wherein said component price of each component is based on the percentage of the market value of the component item to the market value of the package;
- providing each of said component purchase offers to a plurality of potential sellers;
- receiving from one or more of said sellers an acceptance of each of said component purchase offers at a component price and an identification of a component product satisfying said customer-defined condition; and binding said customer to purchase said package if an acceptance is received for each of said component purchase offers.

32. A method of using a computer to process the sale of a package of component items, comprising the steps of:

- obtaining, using said computer, a purchase offer for said package from a customer, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition for each of said component items and a total price;
- deconstructing by said computer said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers each having a component price;
- providing each of said component purchase offers to a plurality of potential sellers;
- increasing the component price of one or more of said component purchase offers that remain unaccepted by said sellers after a predefined time period;
- receiving from one or more of said sellers an acceptance of each of said component purchase offers at a component price and an identification of a component product satisfying said customer-defined condition; and binding said customer to purchase said package if an acceptance is received for each of said component purchase offers.

33. A method of using a computer to process the sale of a package of component items, comprising the steps of:

- obtaining, using said computer, a purchase offer for said package from a customer, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition for each of said component items and a total price;
- deconstructing by said computer said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers;
- providing each of said component purchase offers to a plurality of potential sellers in a serial order based on the likelihood that each component item of the package will be accepted by a seller;
- receiving from one or more of said sellers an acceptance of each of said component purchase offers at a component price and an identification of a component product satisfying said customer-defined condition; and binding said customer to purchase said package if an acceptance is received for each of said component purchase offers.

34. A system for processing the sale of a package of component items comprising:

- a communications port to receive a purchase offer for said package from a customer, said purchase offer containing a description of each component item and a payment identifier for specifying a general-purpose account from which funds may be paid; and
- a processor to (1) deconstruct said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers including component prices, (2) determine if each of said component purchase offers are accepted by one or more potential sellers and thereby bind customer to purchase said package if an acceptance is received for each of said component purchase offers, and (3) prevent said customer from identifying said component prices.

35. A system for processing the sale of a package of component items comprising:

- a communications port for obtaining a purchase offer for said package from a customer and for obtaining one or more rules from a plurality of sellers of said component items, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition for each of said component items and each of said rules containing one or more seller-defined restrictions; and
- a processor to:
 - deconstruct said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers each having a component price;
 - compare one or more of said component purchase offers to said rules to determine whether any of said sellers is willing to accept said component purchase offer if said customer-defined condition satisfies said seller-defined restrictions of at least one of said rules;
 - provide said package of component items to said customer if each of said component purchase offers is acceptable; and
 - prevent said customer from identifying said component price.

36. A method of using a computer to process the sale of a package of component items, comprising:

- obtaining, using a computer, a package purchase offer from a customer, said package purchase offer containing a description of each component items, at least one customer-defined condition for each component item, a total price and a payment identifier for specifying a general-purpose account from which funds may be paid;
- identifying one or more rules from a plurality of sellers of said component items, each of said rules containing one or more seller-defined restrictions;

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comparing said package purchase offer to said rules to determine whether said sellers are willing to accept components of said package purchase offer if said customer-defined condition satisfies said seller-defined restrictions of at least one of said rules;

binding said customer to purchase said package if each component of said package purchase offer is acceptable is acceptable; and

preventing said customer from identifying component prices.

37. The method of claim 36 further comprising deconstructing said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers.

38. A system for processing the sale of a package of component items, comprising:

- a memory device; and
- a processor disposed in communication with said memory device, said processor configured to:
 - obtain a package purchase offer from a customer, said package purchase offer containing a description of each component item, at least one customer-defined condition for each component item, a total price and a payment identifier for specifying a general-purpose account from which funds may be paid;
 - identify one or more rules from a plurality of sellers of said component items, each of said rules containing one or more seller-defined restrictions;
 - compare said package purchase offer to said rules to determine whether said sellers are willing to accept components of said package purchase offer if said customer-defined condition satisfies said seller-defined restrictions of at least one of said rules;
 - bind said customer to purchase said package if each component of said package purchase offer is acceptable; and

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prevent said customer from identifying component prices of said component items.

39. The system of claim 38 wherein said processor is further configured to deconstruct said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers.

40. A system for processing the sale of a package of component items, comprising:

- means for obtaining a package purchase offer from a customer, said package purchase offer containing a description of each component item, at least one customer-defined condition for each component item, a total price and a payment identifier for specifying a general-purpose account from which funds may be paid;
- means for identifying one or more rules from a plurality of sellers of said component items, each of said rules containing one or more seller-defined restrictions;
- means for comparing said package purchase offer to said rules to determine whether said sellers are willing to accept components of said purchase offer if said customer-defined condition satisfies said seller-defined restrictions of at least one of said rules;
- means for binding said customer to purchase said package if each component of said package purchase offer is acceptable; and
- means for preventing said customer from identifying component prices of said components.

41. The system of claim 40 further comprising means for deconstructing said package purchase offer into a plurality of component purchase offers.

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